

# St Mary the Virgin Lapworth Warwickshire B94 5NX

## Church Building - Introduction

[Text and photographs by Peter A J Hill MSc MA]



*'A splendid looking church ...'*  
Pevsner (1966)

*'..an exterior full of interest...clerestory is in the richest Perpendicular, with fine wooden roof on posts embossed with dragons and other beasts'*  
Jenkins (1999)

*'St Mary's is the gem of the diocese...'*  
Sentamu (2005)

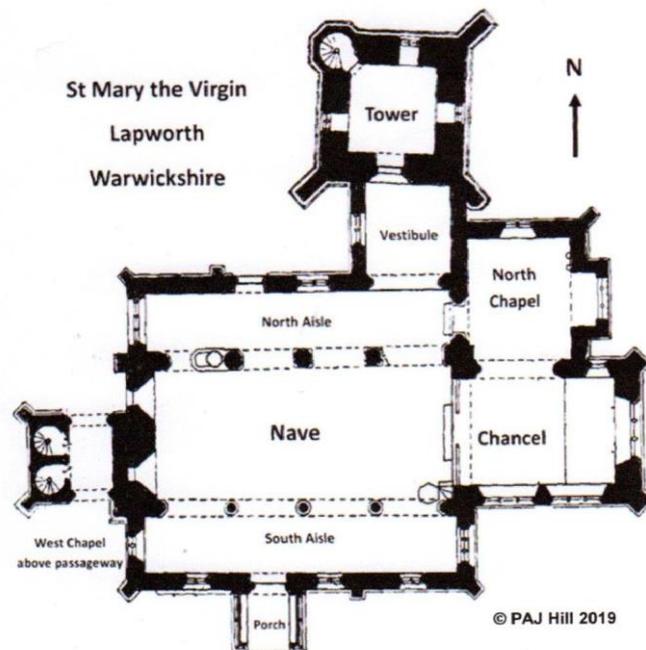
The church is grade I listed, with a grade II listed chest tomb adjacent to the south porch and a grade II listed west boundary wall. The building dates to the early 12<sup>th</sup> century with changes and additions to the fabric throughout the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The bell tower and spire, formally detached, is unusual lying to the north of the church. The tower carries a ring of 6 bells.

The building was restored in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the direction of George Edmund Street, the chancel in 1860 and the nave in 1872. Edwin Francis Reynolds designed the War Memorial (1921)

which stands on ground to the north of the church. Both the churchyards contain memorials to local men who fell in the two World Wars.

When it was founded the church lay in the Diocese of Worcester but in 1905 it was transferred to the new Diocese of Birmingham.

The church itself consists of a nave, chancel, north and south aisles, north chapel (Lady Chapel) and an external upper west chapel (de Montfort Chapel) above a passageway, a former processional route.



PLAN OF LAPWORTH CHURCH

# Church Building - History

[Text and photographs by Peter A J Hill MSc MA]

## 9th - 11th century

*The land forming the Saxon estate of Hlappawurthin (Lapworth) was gifted to the Bishops of Worcester in 816 by Ceonwilf, King of the Mercians. It remained in their possession until 1036 when it was gifted to Herlwin who became lord of the manor. Currently there is no archaeological evidence to establish that there was a church or chapel on the site prior to the 12th century.*

## 12th century

Early in the 12th century a simple church building was constructed c. 1120 which consisted of a nave and chancel. It was located on the higher ground in Lapworth alongside what is now the junction of Church Lane and Tapster Lane at the heart of the former small Saxon settlement of Hlappawurthin (Lapworth). The building was without aisles and lit by small round headed windows. The first rector we hear of was Nicholas c. 1190 at the time when Ralph Marshall was lord of the manor of Lapworth.

## 13th century

Early in the 13th century the north chapel off the chancel and the north aisle were added. The addition of the south aisle came later in the century sometime around 1250 and provided for an altar to St James at its east end next to the piscina. In 1270 the advowson passed from the lord of the manor to Merton College Oxford with whom it has remained ever since.



## 14th century

Early in the 14th century the chancel arch was raised in height, two new south windows were added to the chancel and the font was acquired. The church held a rood screen and wall paintings. In 1373 a chantry chapel was endowed at the west end of the church by Richard de Montfort and others with a chantry priest to say daily mass. It is thought that the unusual chapel at the west end was the home to holy relics. A detached north tower was built c. 1380. The south doorway was rebuilt at some point in the 14th century. The west wall of the nave carried a large statue of Mary. In 1398 a missal, the Lapworth Missal, was completed having been commissioned by a local landowner, Thomas Ashby, who gifted it to the church in the early part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

## 15th century

By the early 15th century the church contained stained glass with examples of armorial glass surviving from the medieval period. Considerable amounts of money were spent on the church in the mid 15th century.

First the north chapel was renovated in 1466 and endowed as a chantry chapel, St Katherine's Chapel, with a priest to say daily mass for William Catesby and the Catesby family. They were associated with the church as lords of the manor between 1418 - 1598 with their armorial glass seen in the west window.

Following the work on the north chapel attention turned to the nave with the roof raised to insert a clerestory to bring more light to the church interior; the interior was adorned with numerous stone carvings of grotesques and human heads. The south aisle was likewise adorned with carvings which acted as a warning to medieval worshippers to one of the seven deadly sins: pride.



The exterior of the church was embellished being embattled along with the addition of pinnacles with numerous carved stone heads, grotesques and gargoyles. An octagonal spire was added to the tower. By the late 15th century the church building was substantially complete in the form that would be recognised today.

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## 16th century

The Reformation of the 16th century brought about considerable change to the church interior. Mass altars and images were removed and religious wall paintings whitewashed over. Both the chantry chapels were closed, the chantry priests dismissed and certain endowments were confiscated by the crown. The Lapworth Missal, containing all the prayers for the celebration of mass, was removed from the church.

The new religious order saw a wooden Elizabethan communion table placed in the centre of the chancel along with a pulpit fixed to the east pier of the south aisle on the nave side. The Book of Common prayer was placed centrally on a lectern in the nave close to the chancel arch.

It is probable that it was at this time that a false roof was fixed to the nave roof so as to cover over the beautiful carved timbers of the roof some of which still show signs of a decorative paint scheme.

## 17th century

Early in the century, in 1615, one of the Parish Charity Feoffees (Trustees), William Askew, a local landowner, carried away all the stones from the churchyard cross from the south side of the church building for his own use. The churchyard cross was described at the time as '*... a verie fayer cross built with arches wherin a dosen men might have stood dry if occation had served and was a verie convenient cross for a preacher...?*'.

Musket shot damage occurred to the east wall and northeast buttress of the tower most probably during the period of the English Civil War (1642-1651). Likewise the corbelled heads on the font were all slighted, either at an earlier date by iconoclasts, or at this time.

## 18th century

During in the 1700s a west gallery was erected across the rear of the nave for a village orchestra which played a variety of instruments during church services. The fabric of the church building now entered into a period of gradual decline with absentee rectors becoming the norm during the 1700s; something which was to continue until well into the early 19th century.

## 19th century

The serious deterioration of the church fabric was finally recognised in 1806 leading to an ill-advised attempt to restore the chancel. In 1807 the rood screen was taken down and the timber used to shore up the south wall of the chancel. The east window was blocked apart from a very narrow central opening and boards with the Commandments and the Creed placed to each side. Box pews were placed partly in the chancel (rector) and the north chapel (lord of the manor) and throughout the church with places allocated to households in the parish. The north door adjacent to the font was blocked.

A Board of Benefactions was painted at this time (or possibly earlier) and placed over the other small north door leading to the tower from the north aisle. The south porch, now falling down, was demolished and not replaced.

In 1816 a new version of the Royal Arms was painted by a local man from nearby Rowington village and placed in the church. Somewhat later, in 1855, the church acquired an organ which was placed in the north chapel.

Lapworth then embraced the Victorian enthusiasm for church 'restoration' which took place in two phases due to financial constraints. Work was put in hand in 1860 to restore the chancel under the direction of G E Street. The chancel roof was removed and rebuilt, the south chancel wall was taken down and rebuilt, a new east window with glazing was installed along with a reredos below the window and tiling

to the floor and part of the east wall. Choir stalls were placed in the chancel with front panels faced with medieval wood tracery from the redundant rood screen. A new stone and marble communion rail was placed beneath the chancel arch and similarly constructed pulpit was installed nearby.



In 1863 a new unglazed porch was erected along with a new oak south door.

The remainder of the church was restored in 1872 under Street's direction. Wall plaster was scraped from the walls, the Romanesque window opening above the north arcading was revealed, the blocked low windows of the south aisle along with the piscina exposed and the westernmost low windows opened out and glazed.

The false roof to the nave was removed to display the fine timber roof described by Jenkins as a '... fine wooden roof on posts embossed with dragons and other beasts'. An all but fleeting glimpse of the St Christopher wall painting was revealed and then lost from the north wall of the north aisle as the plaster was stripped away from the wall.



The west gallery was removed, a large connecting passageway, the vestibule, was constructed to connect the nave to the tower with a new pointed arch opening from the north aisle. At the same time a large recess was created by moving the east wall of the north chapel outwards to take the organ. All the box pews were removed and replaced with open pine bench pews.

Much of the stained glass seen today in the chancel, nave and aisles was acquired during the period 1860 - 1876. In 1883 the top sixteen feet of the spire were replaced and in 1899 an oak cover was placed on the font.

## 20th century



The 20th century saw a renewed interest taken in the church building and its surroundings. The War Memorial was dedicated on ground to the north of the church in 1921. Then in 1922-23 the north chapel was given a 'makeover' under the direction of the architect responsible for the war memorial, E F Reynolds.

This involved using the recess (*which had been found was not such a good place for the organ*) to relocate the Elizabethan communion table from the chancel. Behind the communion table was placed an inscribed stone memorial to the fallen, timberwork with the words *Sanctus, Sanctus* above, matching stone plinths to each side of the recess and oak boards with the Rolls of Honour.

*(Part of the architect's original plan was a square set window with three vertical lights for the east wall of the recess along with a beautiful oak parclose screen between the chapel and the chancel - these ideas were not taken up by the church.)*

The Wale family commissioned the memorial stained glass (1922) to Captain Ade Wale found in the north window of the north chapel which was rededicated as the War Memorial Chapel in 1923.

In 1925 the low marble and stone Victorian communion rail and pulpit were removed. They were replaced by an oak choir screen and pulpit designed by E F Reynolds and commissioned by the Jefferson family. In 1928 the Eric Gill memorial to Florence Bradshaw was placed in the north chapel.



In 1935 the Bell family commissioned the beautiful carved oak communion rail to the memory of the Revd Francis Lendon Bell and his wife Cecily Mercy. The latter was the sister of Florence Bradshaw commemorated on the Eric Gill memorial tablet. The communion rail was made by Anthony Lloyd of Cheswick.

During the period 1958 - 1980 Hugh Birkett, a local cabinet maker who worked in the traditional way favoured by the Arts & Crafts movement, designed and made much of the light oak furnishings seen throughout the church. In the 1960s the Victorian stained glass from the south lancet window was removed and a stair in light oak made by Hugh Birkett was inserted to connect the west chapel to the nave. In 1990 the porch was finally glazed.



## 21st century



In 2001 a statue of Mary with the child Jesus, commissioned by the Bridgewater family and designed by the sculptor A. John Poole, was placed on the west wall of the nave.

In 2014 a new window was cut into the east wall of the north chapel. The stained glass, designed by Tony Naylor, was inserted by him in the year following with the window called the **Window of Hope**.



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## Church Guide Booklets

*There is a selection of guide booklets covering many aspects of the church and its contents to be found inside the church which are available for purchase.*

## Church Opening

*The church is open daily for visitors and for regular church services.*